



AFRICAN-AMERICAN AFFAIRS COMMISSION  
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Testimony before the Commerce Committee

Thursday, February 19, 2009

10:00 AM in Room 1D of the LOB

Good morning/afternoon Senator LeBeau, Representative Berger and ranking members of the Commerce Committee. My name is Frank Sykes and I am the Legislative Analyst with the African-American Affairs Commission (AAAC). The Commission represents a voice on various issues impacting the African-American community in our state. I am here today speaking in support of **SB 880 – An Act concerning trade with Africa.**

We see this bill as an initial step towards building and strengthening trade and investment opportunities between Connecticut and the continent of Africa. It is our belief that in light of the current economic climate our state should take on new, bold initiatives capable of generating jobs in the long term. As such a study of DECD programs concerning Africa is timely. We are all aware of the unemployment situation in the state and the devastating impact it's having on communities. In 2007 the jobless rate was 4.6 percent and 5.7 percent in 2008. As of December of 2008 the rate is 7.1 percent.<sup>1</sup> Many businesses including

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, State Unemployment Rates



small to mid size alike have suffered huge job losses some irreversible, yet small businesses play a crucial role in the creation and expansion of new jobs. In our state today there businesses eager to enter new markets such as Africa, yet the lack of knowledge, expertise and a real understanding of the region presents a challenge for many.

Africa is a complex region. For example there is no such thing as a common African culture. Africa comprises of 53 countries with over a 1000 indigenous languages. Even within national boundaries, there can be vast ethno-cultural differences among populations. The same applies to its economy, class structure, climate etc.<sup>2</sup> Western media has not helped in presenting an objective view of the continent as such misconceptions and misinformation persist. News from this part of the world is often negative, however layered under all the gloom and doom is also a continent with boundless opportunities. Opportunities in agro-business, infrastructure projects, healthcare etc. just to name a few.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) names Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia as countries with emerging market based economies. These are countries that have undertaken significant political and socio-economic reform over the last decade and are ripe for investment. It is projected that many more African nations will follow this path, creating even greater investment opportunities for Connecticut businesses. Therefore a study such as the one, being proposed is needed. It should provide a better understanding of the continent's opportunities, strengths, weaknesses and challenges. A study of this nature has the potential of laying the groundwork and potentially opening doors for increased businesses activity between the state of Connecticut and Africa.

A number of countries, states and even municipalities recognize the vast investment and trade opportunities Africa has to offer and have taken advantage.

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<sup>2</sup> World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision" United Nations



For example Prince George's county in Maryland has established an African Trade Office. Other municipalities have established formal and informal partnerships, cultural exchange programs etc. with different parts of Africa all in an attempt to strengthen ties and learn more about the continent. The time is right for Connecticut to do the same and pay more attention to this part of the world. We urge your support for this bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.